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ABSTRACT

This article discusses grammar and its place in elementary English teaching. The article's eight sections are as follows: (1) Some People Expect a Lot of Grammar; (2) Standard and Non-Standard; (3) How Do Children Learn Grammar? (4) What Can the Teacher Do? (5) What Should We Tell the Children? (6) Grammar and the Organization of Meaning in Text; (7) Grammar in Familiar Teaching Strategies (writing in terms of modeling, joint construction, and conferencing reading in terms of shared book, cloze passages, and preparation for reading factual texts, and further activities, e.g., paragraphing, sentence components, and word study); and (8) The Last Word? (a caveat against taking this issue of PEN as the "last word" on grammar in primary English teaching). The issue advocates that grammar not be taught to school children as if it were separate from writing and other uses of language. It also suggests that any grammatical knowledge learned will only have value and relevance if the students are also developing as competent writers and speakers through all the rich variety of experiences that can be provided throughout elementary school and beyond. (SR)

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Grammar, Part 2. PEN 78

by

John Collerson

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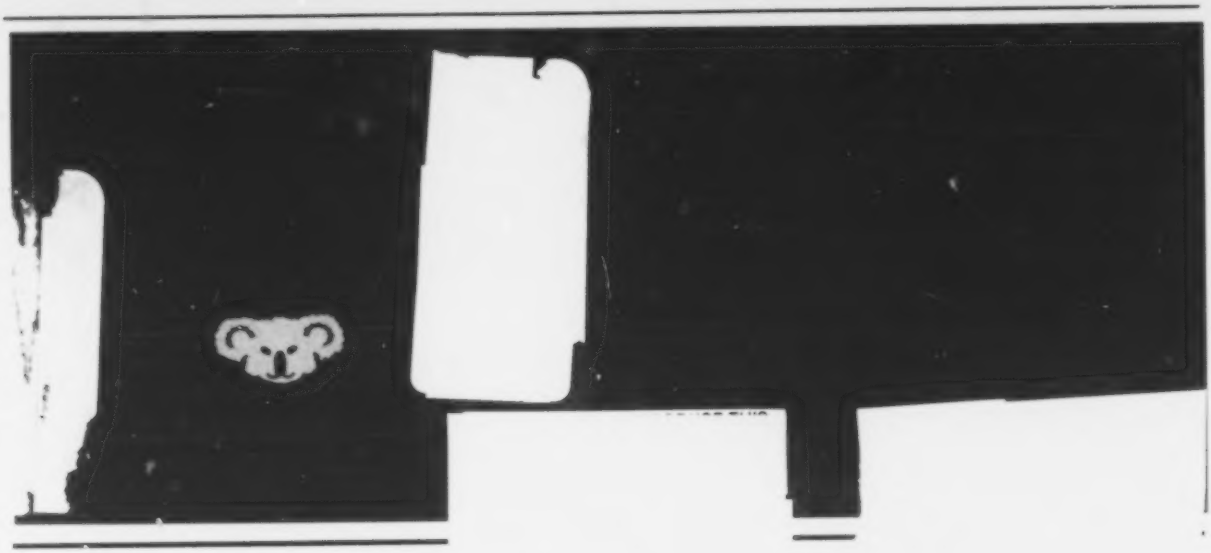

Some People Expect a Lot of Grammar

One of our politicians complained last year that Australian children were using Kylie Mole – a TV comedy show character – as a role model for their speech. The remedy offered for this supposed problem was that school students should be taught 'speech and grammar'. (Kylie Mole's reaction would probably be, 'Well, that is so spac. My speech is rooly excellent, I rekon.')

Many people seem to believe that the teaching of grammar will achieve a kind of revolution in the way our students speak. Such people latch on to some features of English which are widely used in the community and reduce them all to a simple problem of 'incorrect English'. They propose what they think is a simple solution: 'Teach the kids grammar' – sorry, 'Teach the children grammar.'

Yet the different kinds of English within our community are not just matters of correct or incorrect grammar. They arise partly from people's different backgrounds and experience (i.e. social dialect variation) and partly because we all use different kinds of English (i.e. registers) for different purposes. Informal speech is very different from revised and edited writing.

Standard and Non-Standard

The kind of English which children bring to school reflects their home background. Often this home dialect will be somewhat different from standard English. One of our aims at school is to help children learn to use standard English with competence and confidence. Yet that is not a simple matter, as every teacher knows, and it is not primarily a matter of grammar.

It is true that some of the differences between standard and non-standard English are grammatical features. People who express concerns about grammar are often thinking of these features, but they are part of a wider social dialect variation.

Non-standard dialects are widely used in the community for many purposes; they are quite legitimate kinds of English and can be very effective. On the other hand, there are times when standard English is appropriate and those who can use it competently have an advantage. It is a social dialect, regularly used in speech by some people, and is also the kind of English normally used and regarded as appropriate for writing.

However, many of the children in our schools – and some teachers – use a non-standard variety of English as their everyday version of English. They have learnt it in the home and use it amongst their family and friends; it helps to confirm their membership of those groups. Because it is dominant in their language competence, they don't easily switch to standard English. So in children's speech or writing we will come across non-standard features such as 'I done it', 'Who owns them things?', 'We was in the playground – where were youse?' Teachers may be understandably concerned about usages like these, but it is important to recognise that they are not mistakes. They are all perfectly grammatical in some dialect of English, even though not in standard English. Children use them because they have learnt the conventions of their own home dialect.

Teachers should accept children's home dialect as a genuine form of English. That must be our starting point – where the children are. At the same time we should have the long-term aim of helping children to use standard English in their writing, where it is the established convention. Most teachers accept this aim and are working towards it in various ways. But it is not very helpful to treat standard English as the only legitimate kind of English – as if everything else were simply 'incorrect'.

Children who use non-standard grammatical features in their writing will not suddenly change, and there is no guarantee that teaching them grammar will help them gain control of standard English. But over a period of several years they will gradually modify their usage towards standard English if they are getting appropriate experience of it. In this development teachers have an important role to play, which is discussed in the later sections of this PEN. But first we must consider another question.

How Do Children Learn Grammar?

Children learn the grammar of their language – whatever language is spoken around them – as they learn the language. The grammar is inherent in the language. They develop their language through the experience of using it in speaking and listening, and in writing and reading: by interacting with other people, interacting with books, interacting through the written word. Conversation is very important in the early years, and so too is familiarity with books and with the various purposes of writing and print. It is through these kinds of experience that children become familiar with their language, including the range of grammatical structures available to them.

They do not learn the grammar separately, yet in learning language they formulate grammatical rules – not rules they can state, but rules they can use. We get hints of this rule-making when we hear young children say things like 'He runned away.' Even school-age children might say or write things like 'We did go to Newcastle.' In the long run they gradually refine their grammatical system, bringing it into line with adult conventions.

Sometimes children focus on the language itself and ask specific questions about it. A Year 6 child, writing a letter at home, asked her parent a couple of questions about the agreement of subject and verb – though she didn't use those terms. She had written 'Everyone is ...', but when she read this aloud, she paused and asked, 'Is it "Everyone is" or "Everyone are"?' Later she asked, 'Is it "How is Jane and Christopher?" or "How are ..."?' These are minor points, but they show how we can become conscious of the language we are using. Most importantly, they illustrate how questions about grammar can arise in the process of writing. If children are writing regularly, many grammatical points can be dealt with at the time of need and in the context of their own writing.

As children become aware of some of the grammatical features of their language, they can also learn *about* the grammar and begin to acquire 'a language for talking about language'.

What Can the Teacher Do?

The foundation of children's ability to use the grammar of their language is their active experience of language in use. So read them stories and other things; encourage them to read for themselves; give them opportunities to speak and develop their ideas through speaking rather than listening all the time – though of course they must be listening some of the time. And make sure they do lots of writing – not merely simple recounts, but as time goes on introduce them to a variety of genres.

If children use non-standard features in their speech, don't rush in to 'correct' them. It's better just to model the standard forms as you respond to their meanings. Focus on what a child is saying rather than on how he or she is saying it. So if a child says, 'I ain't got none', you might reply, 'Oh, you haven't got any, have you?'

Problems with grammatical features in children's writing may be dealt with in a conference in much the same way as spelling or other issues are dealt with. In each case you must decide which particular points to take up at any one time. As a first step you might check whether the children can sort out the problems for themselves.

For example, one child, writing about how a spider builds its web, referred to the spider as 'he', 'she' and 'it' within the space of a few sentences. In such a case you could check to see whether the child is aware of the inconsistency – perhaps by asking if the spider is male or female, or if the three pronouns all refer to the same thing. Whether you use terms like *pronoun* and *gender* depends on whether the child already understands them. What is important is that the child should understand the basic grammatical issue: namely, that a writer must be consistent in using pronouns to refer to something already mentioned so that the reference is clear to the reader.

In our current approach to writing the conference provides opportunities for brief discussion of grammatical features. Often this will be an individual conference, but there is also scope for group conferences on particular points. Since the grammar discussed in conferences will be mainly incidental, you will probably need to provide some planned focus on points of grammar as well – for example, in whole class mini-lessons or demonstrations. Sometimes a grammatical point can be dealt with just by using an example or two; at other times specific grammatical terms will help to focus the point.

What Should We Tell the Children?

There is no doubt that the teacher needs to have a broad understanding of English grammar, but how much of this grammatical knowledge should be given to the children? Children do need some grammatical terms and concepts so that they share with the teacher a 'language for talking about language'. Yet what is ultimately needed is not just a few grammatical terms, but a framework of understanding of the grammar itself. It is certainly true that too much grammar too soon will only get in the way. However, as children's language competence grows, knowing about grammar will not only support that competence but will also contribute to their understanding of language as such and the place it has in their lives and in the community.

The grammatical terms and concepts set out in PEN 77 (*Grammar: Part 1*) should not be taught in isolation. On the contrary, they should be closely tied in with discussion of the children's own writing and other texts, so that grammatical points can be seen in relation to whole texts. In the long run, the most important aspects of grammar for children to grasp are not points of detail like subject-verb agreement and other surface conventions, but the ways in which meaning is organised and presented in a text so that the purposes of the text can be achieved. Some examples of how these might emerge in teaching are discussed in the next section.

Grammar and the Organisation of Meaning in Text

When preparing children to read a factual text, we might explain some of the difficulties they could encounter. Besides technical terms or other unfamiliar vocabulary, problems may arise from the grammatical orientation of the text. Let's look at an example – a sentence from a passage explaining the Greenhouse Effect.

> Global industrialisation over the past two hundred years, using vast amounts of coal and oil, has resulted in an increase of carbon being released to the atmosphere.

This sentence is basically saying 'something has resulted in something'. Yet those two 'somethings' are essentially not things, but happenings. As such they could be represented by verbs, which is often more straightforward although more words have to be used.

> Over the past two hundred years many factories have been built all over the world. Because these factories use vast amounts of coal and oil, more carbon has been released into the atmosphere.

It is useful for children to learn how to unpack sentences about 'things', where the meaning is highly concentrated, and turn them into sentences about actions and happenings, which are usually closer to their own ways of thinking and talking about experience. This is best done by discussing examples selected from texts the children are reading in pursuit of other interests.

One of the grammatical processes involved here is nominalisation, which is also evident in the following sequence of examples.

> The bus crashed because a tyre blew out.
> The bus crashed because of a tyre blow-out.
> The bus crash was caused by a tyre blow-out.
> The cause of the bus crash was a tyre blow-out.

In each sentence meanings are expressed through different grammatical resources. Meanings expressed as actions in the first example are expressed as things in the last:

> 'crashed' (verb) becomes 'crash' (noun)
> 'blew out' (verb) becomes 'blow-out' (noun).

The notion of cause undergoes even more change. As the grammar changes, the meaning is also subtly changed, so that the last sentence is about 'the cause of the bus crash' – something more abstract. The 'happening' has become an abstract 'thing'.

Upper primary children should become aware of grammatical relationships like these, not only so that they can competently read texts which are oriented towards 'things' rather than happenings, but also so that they can learn to use these resources in their writing. As I have remarked, verb-oriented written texts are often more straightforward and readable because they are closer to the children's spoken language. However, there will be times, especially in the secondary school, when they may be expected to write texts more heavily marked by nominalisation. They will have an advantage if they can competently handle a range of options in their writing and make the appropriate choices for each specific purpose.

The order and arrangement of ideas in a text is closely bound up with the deployment of clauses and sentences. This is an aspect of writing which could well be discussed in a conference. Consider the following extract from a report by an upper primary child.

CATS

> Cats are very popular pets, but they are closely related to some of the bigger cats like lions and tigers they are all from the same family. Though they are all different sizes they have very much in common.

The clause 'they are all from the same family' ought to be punctuated as a separate sentence (or at least as an independent clause with a semi-colon or colon after 'tigers'), and that would be an obvious point to take up in discussion. However, a more radical revision is possible: the same clause could be moved to the end of the quoted extract, since it sums up the ideas of the previous clauses.

> Cats are very popular pets, but they are closely related to some of the bigger cats like lions and tigers. Though they are all different sizes they have very much in common: they are all from the same family.

Another example comes from an explanation of *Why We Have Summer and Winter*, written by a Year 6 child as part of a science unit on the earth and the solar system. Her first draft began thus:

> We have Summer and Winter because the earth orbits the sun. It is tilted on an axis.

In a conference her teacher suggested changes to make it read:

> We have Summer and Winter because the earth orbits the sun and the earth is tilted on an axis.

The last clause has become a clause of reason linked by 'and' to the previous reason clause (the word 'because' does not have to be repeated). Its place in the explanation is now made explicit.

Grammar in Familiar Teaching Strategies

In much of children's classroom language experience the grammar will remain implicit. However, as I indicated earlier, there will be times when you want to engage in explicit discussion of grammatical features – perhaps in a mini-lesson for the whole class, perhaps with a small group or with individuals. Many activities already established in our teaching repertoire provide suitable opportunities, and this section suggests some of them.

WRITING

You can consider the grammatical features of written texts at various stages of the curriculum cycle for writing.

Modelling

Let's say you are reading and discussing texts which exemplify a particular genre. Discuss the grammatical features of the genre and how they help to achieve the purpose of the text. (Sample texts illustrating the language features of several genres can be found in Beverly Derewianka's *Exploring How Texts Work* [PETA, 1990].) These are some of the features you could talk about.

Recounts and Narratives

- often begin with a circumstance of time or place (or both), either in a phrase or a clause
- signal the sequence of events with words like 'then', 'after', etc.
- are usually cast in the past tense.

Explanations

- use *because* clauses and other ways of marking the reasons
- are usually written in the 'timeless' present.

Expositions and Written Discussions

- introduce each argument or step in the argument with words and phrases such as 'firstly', 'on the other hand', 'finally', etc.

Joint construction

When you are composing a text with your students, negotiating each part so as to achieve the purposes of the genre, you will continually be making joint decisions about grammatical questions. Sometimes these questions can be discussed in explicit grammatical terms, sometimes through the wordings being considered.

Conferencing

Some grammatical issues which could come up for discussion at various stages of the writing process include:

- the order and arrangement of ideas in the text, paragraphing and the deployment of clauses and sentences – i.e. what goes with what and where the boundaries should be (cf. the CATS text discussed on page 4)
- what pronouns refer to, i.e. the cohesive ties within the text (cf. 'he', 'she' or 'it' and the spider, discussed on page 2).

READING

Discussion and study of reading material will offer some opportunities for considering grammatical points – and in a context where the main focus of the discussion will probably be on other issues. Some of these points will be similar to those discussed in writing conferences, but the reinforcement will be helpful.

Shared book

Show how the author manages cohesive ties formed through pronouns and conjunctions, as well as meaning relationships amongst other groups of words in the text. On another occasion draw attention to the way an author manages direct speech, both in wording and in punctuation.

Cloze passages

A post-cloze discussion can often involve grammatical issues. For example, some children's answers may be in the appropriate grammatical category (word class, tense, etc.), even though they are unacceptable for other reasons. Issues which can arise include sequence of tenses, pronoun reference and cohesion, and choice of conjunctions – whether the cloze passage has been specially constructed to highlight such issues or not.

Preparation for reading factual texts

Discuss parts of the text where the grammatical orientation might pose difficulties for readers (see page 3).

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

So far I have shown how you can take opportunities for explicit discussion of language features as they arise in the course of established activities. But you can also plan mini-lessons or specific demonstrations of some grammatical features. Here are some examples of things that might be dealt with in this way.

Paragraphing

Children need to understand the reasons for paragraphing and where to make paragraph breaks. They can explore this by discussing where to start new paragraphs in a passage from which the paragraph breaks have been removed, as well as in their own writing and in texts they are reading.

Sentence components

By rearranging parts of a sentence (clauses and their components) and by adding further elements to extend the sentence, children can explore the grammatical resources of the language for expressing meaning. This can be done in many ways – with cards on the table, with blackboard and chalk or with an overhead projector. Ideally the sentences used should come from printed texts that the children are familiar with, or from other children's writing, rather than being specially created for the purpose. The techniques described by Max Kemp as transformations offer many possibilities (see Kemp, *Watching Children Read and Write*, Nelson, 1987, pp. 66-74).

Word study

In the context of vocabulary development or spelling you can explore:

- how prefixes usually change the meaning of what they are added to, while suffixes generally change the grammatical category
- topic-based word groups, such as the *tele-* series (telephone, telegraph, television, 'telly', Telecom, etc.), perhaps relating them to a semantic map
- the use of apostrophes in contractions, contrasting this with possessive pronouns, etc. (e.g. 'you're' compared with 'your').

It is important that these mini-lessons be related to things that the children are actually writing or encountering in their reading – or to their oral language. The outline of grammar provided in PEN 77 may suggest some further possibilities for grammatical features that could come into focus in class discussion.

The Last Word?

This PEN should not be taken as the last word on grammar in primary English teaching. I'm sure it won't be. Yet, of all topics, grammar is especially prone to misinterpretation, so let me now have my last word for this PEN.

Grammar should not be taught to school children as if it were separate from their writing and other uses of language. Any grammatical knowledge they learn will only have value and relevance for them if they are also developing as competent writers and speakers through all the rich variety of experiences we can provide for them throughout primary school and beyond. An understanding of how language works is only part of this, although an important part.

The teacher's understanding of grammar (and other aspects of language) can provide insight into the way language works and into some of the problems children face in putting meaning into words. That understanding is one of the resources teachers can draw on as they guide children towards competence in language.

Acknowledgements

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John Collerson edited *Writing for Life* (PETA, 1988). He has been interested in grammar and other aspects of language and children's language development for several years, and his *Grammar: Part 1* was published as PEN 77 in August 1990.

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